

Grounding Education in the Environmental Humanities: Exploring Place-Based Pedagogies in the South

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New York, NY: Routledge, 2019

(ix + 214 pages, ISBN 978-1-138-54440-6, \$140.00)

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On a spring break service-learning trip to El Paso, Texas in 2015, my students were asked by a community organizer, “How do you want to occupy your space in this world?” The essays in this volume, the result of a series of workshops held from 2013 to 2016, provide a pedagogical first step in answering that question by providing viable place-based learning strategies that make the connections between local and global environmental realities palpable while honing the skills necessary for civic engagement. Focused on the South, the authors do ground their research in theory and method so that it is easily transferrable to other landscapes.

The volume is informed by a critical pedagogy of place that extends the “South” beyond white narratives centered on the eleven Confederate States of the American Civil War toward bioregions that encompass the multicultural realities of the Native Americans, Africans, Latinxs, and Asians who have also inhabited its landscape. Rooted in the humanities, e.g. literature, public history, archaeology, religious studies, and theology, these place-based pedagogies also provide a dimension of reconciliation and healing for the region by immersing students in actual, unpredictable, deeply interdependent human and nonhuman lives from Texas to Kentucky and North Carolina to Florida.

The volume is divided into four parts. Part One, “Place, Theology, and Practice,” focuses primarily on Christian traditions of nature, place, and sacramental practice, with one chapter including perspective-changing Native American elements. These chapters include detailed assignments using mindfulness and digital storytelling as tools for deep learning. Part Two, “Engaging with Community Through Place,” addresses a shared theme of decolonizing American history by affording university students opportunities to be in dialogue with local Native and African American communities on their own ground. This section also offers helpful models with which to integrate sustainability and civic engagement at the institutional, programmatic, and course level. Part Three, “Wounded Places, Healing Places,” centers on those places and people who are systemically ignored and actively marginalized, providing powerful examples of transformative community projects that cross boundaries of pollution and pain. Part Four, “Assessing, Concluding, Moving Forward,” while perhaps the weakest section, does offer flexible guidelines and general principles for place-based courses.

A discerning reflexivity informs the authors’ pedagogical suggestions and choices about course design, assignments, and assessment. The chapters designated “Field Trip” in each section are particularly compelling as they give a rich ecological, archaeological, and ethnographic texture to the South through pedagogies that guide students not only to stand in and empathize with its thickly woven history, but also to be vulnerable to and touched by it. These essays contain a variety of practical ways to explore how to “occupy one’s space in this world” in full relationship with place, be that El Paso’s Thunderbird formation, Winston-Salem’s prisoner re-entry program, or a white supremacist rally in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.